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# Vernacular Religion, Contemporary Spirituality and Emergent Identities

## Lessons from Lauri Honko

**T**his article examines lessons which can still be learned from Professor Lauri Honko's research and writings, particularly for those working at the interstices of folklore and religious studies who appreciate the mutually enriching relationship between the two fields which has been the hallmark of modern Finnish and Nordic scholarship.

Three broad areas are considered here by way of illustration: the importance of studying belief and the continuing utility of genre as a tool of research; the use of folklore and material culture in the formation of cultural and spiritual identities in the contemporary milieu; and tradition ecology in relation to Celtic spirituality.

### Introduction

In the course of the 2013 conference 'The Role of Theory in Folkloristics and Comparative Religion', it became clear that there were many personal experience narratives (PENs) – and possibly even legends – concerning Professor Lauri Honko. I also have a PEN relating to him, for I know exactly when and where I first encountered his work. I was an MA student studying folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland in 1977, taking the last module on myth taught by the great Professor Herbert Halpert. It was an immensely stimulating course with an impressive reading list, including Honko's article 'Memorates and the study of folk beliefs' (1964), and I can remember reading that article and thinking 'this is marvellous'. While studying religious studies at Lancaster University under Professor Ninian Smart, we had talked a lot about the role and importance of worldview and the need for informed empathy and empathetic understanding to get inside worldviews sufficiently to grasp their internal logic. The goal was not to agree or disagree with any particular way of

seeing the world, but to appreciate how the world would appear and how one would act in the world were one to be operating within a particular worldview. Honko's article articulated and confirmed the need for a good, grounded understanding of an individual's worldview embedded in and generated by the specific cultural context in order to understand how the world is seen, experienced, and narrated in everyday life. It was not dealing with the religious virtuosi – frequently the focus in religious studies – but with ordinary people, in a way often off the radar of much formal academic study of religions at that time. It also had a significant effect on a Catholic, Newfoundland classmate of mine, for whom Honko's model was a revelation, reframing an experience he had had as a teenager, hearing a noise in a darkening church on Halloween. This too was a valuable lesson in relation to 'the scholarly voice and the personal voice' (Hufford 1995), and the importance of reflexivity. Thus, while I greatly regret that I never met Lauri Honko in person, his scholarship has had an important influence on me and it is a mark of the depth of Honko's insights that his work still has so much relevance decades later for the study, articulation and understanding of vernacular religion and contemporary spirituality.

In this article I will briefly address aspects of my research related to Honko's work: the importance of studying belief and the continuing utility of genre as a tool of research; the use of folklore and material culture in the formation of cultural and spiritual identities in the contemporary milieu; and tradition ecology in relation to Celtic spirituality. However, I will start with some background discussion of vernacular religion, a field and an approach which in many ways reflects a number of Honko's scholarly concerns and insights and which, I suggest, build on

and continue the historic Nordic trend of the mutually beneficial relationship between folkloristics and religious studies.

### Vernacular religion

In the preface to *The Theory of Culture of Folklorist Lauri Honko, 1932–2002*, Armin Geertz points out that ‘With his interdisciplinary approach combining folkloristics and fieldwork with the history of religions, Honko was able to bridge disciplines, confront important questions, and break new ground’ (Geertz 2013: x), while Matti Kamppinen and Pekka Hakamies rightly observe that ‘Nordic cultural research has been characterised by a close alliance between Religious Studies and Folkloristics’ (Kamppinen and Hakamies 2013: 3). I wish to underline what a tremendous advantage this has been. By contrast, the study of religion in Britain has been disadvantaged by this lack of an active and widespread symbiosis between the two fields. For me, with a background in both religious studies and folklore/ethnology and working in the UK, it has been important to encourage the study of vernacular religion in the UK context, to foster awareness of contemporary spirituality in relation to folklore and ethnology, and extol the advantages of insights from folklore and ethnology in relation to the study of religion. We are ‘better together’.

Four decades ago the American folklorist Don Yoder, drawing heavily upon the German tradition of scholarship, succinctly described folk religion as ‘the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion’ (Yoder 1974: 14), recognising the huge and frequently under-studied area of religious life that should be taken into account to provide a rounded picture of religion as it is lived. Attempting to bring this neglected area into sharper focus in UK religious studies, some years ago I suggested that to obtain a more realistic view of religion it should be viewed in terms of three interacting components: official religion (what is accepted orthodoxy at any given time within institutional religion, although this changes with time and context), folk religion (meaning that which is generally accepted and transmitted belief and practice, regardless of the institutional view) and individual religion (the product of the received tradition – folk and official – and personal interpretations of this package, gained from experience and perceptions of efficacy) (Bowman 2004). My point was that

these different components interact to produce what, for each person, constitutes religion; that these are not ‘neat’ compartments; that folk religion is not a tidy and easily recognisable category separate from (and inferior to) official religion; and that folk and individual religion are *not* the result of people getting ‘pure’ religion wrong.

Folk religion remains a contested category within the study of religions and folklore. Some European countries have produced rich literatures that discuss the specific meanings attached to the term and to the historical, social and intellectual factors that gave rise to these meanings (see Kapáló 2013). In the USA, UK and some other parts of Europe, however, the term and concept of ‘vernacular religion’ is increasingly used by scholars working at the interstices of folklore/ethnology and religious studies.

The American scholar Leonard Primiano (with an academic background in both religious studies and folklore) describes vernacular religion as ‘an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the religious lives of individuals with special attention to the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioral, and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief’ (Primiano 1995: 44). Whereas, as Yoder and others have shown, there have been many debates over, and conceptualisations of, folk religion, Leonard Primiano problematises the category of *official* religion, rightly stating the obvious, namely that institutional religion ‘is itself conflicted and not monolithic’ (Primiano 2012: 384). He feels that any two-tiered model of ‘folk’ and ‘official’ religion ‘residualizes the religious lives of believers and at the same time reifies the authenticity of religious institutions as the exemplar of human religiosity’ (Primiano 1995: 39). Claiming that ‘Religious belief takes as many forms in a tradition as there are individual believers’ (p. 51), he asserts that no one, including members of institutional hierarchies, ‘lives an “officially” religious life in a pure unadulterated form’ (p. 46). Thus he calls for scholars to stop perpetuating ‘the value judgement that people’s ideas and practices, because they do not represent the refined statements of a religious institution, are indeed unofficial and fringe’ (p. 46).

Primiano argues that vernacular religion is not simply another term for folk religion, not simply the ‘dichotomous or dialectical partner of “institutional” religious forms’; vernacular religion, he insists, ‘represents a theoretical definition of another term’ (Primiano 2012: 384). Drawing attention to the personal and private dimensions of belief and world-

view, Primiano emphasises the need to study 'religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it' (Primiano 1995: 44). His interest is not in religion as an abstract system but in its multiple forms. Primiano also draws attention to 'bidirectional influences of environments upon individuals and of individuals upon environments in the process of believing' (p. 44) and claims that 'Vernacular religion is a way of communicating, thinking, behaving within, and conforming to, particular cultural circumstances' (p. 42).

In all of this, we can see issues raised and factors highlighted by Lauri Honko, such as the importance of both natural environment *and* cultural context; the significance of individual creativity and instrumentality in relation to tradition; the stress on process and practice. Very much in the spirit of Honko's scholarship, Primiano claims that vernacular religion's conceptual value lies in the fact that it 'highlights the power of the individual and communities of individuals to create and re-create their own religion' (Primiano 2012: 383). This was splendidly demonstrated by Judit Kis-Halas (2012), in her research on the practices and narrative autobiography of a Hungarian healer and diviner, who uses magical formulae and wax pouring drawing on the traditions of folk healers in that region, but also employs techniques for conjuring angels and the preparation of angelic amulets which appear to have been influenced by the American New Age 'angel expert' Doreen Virtue. Additionally, she calls upon particular saints 'to work for her' in line with vernacular tradition, and her healing activity is at least tacitly acknowledged by the local Catholic priest. This woman's praxis and self-image are thus constructed in the context of folk medicine praxis, commodified contemporary spirituality and vernacular Christianity; it is probably safe to assume that she is not kept awake at night by concerns over category conflicts and definitional difficulties. The vernacular religious approach anticipates heterogeneity and individual creativity and therefore does not dismiss or ignore it as methodologically inconvenient or deviant.

### Genre and the study of belief

Primiano has commented that 'One of the hallmarks of the study of religion by folklorists has been their attempt to do justice to belief and lived experience' (Primiano 1995: 41). By not automatically privileging written over oral forms, through paying attention to different forms of narrative, by close observa-

tion of material culture and the use made of it (both formally and informally), through observing belief spilling over into diverse aspects of behaviour and by appreciating the dynamic nature of tradition, folkloristic studies at their best have presented a rich and nuanced picture of belief in action. The sacralisation of everyday life through the observation of particular diets and foodways (frequently bolstered by corroborative legends and PENs); the conceptualisation of time through the lens of the Church year or the eightfold 'Celtic' calendar followed by many contemporary pagans; the informal relationships conducted with divine/other-than-human persons in the home, often channelled through the medium of material culture such as statues, holy pictures and home shrines are the stuff of lived religion long appreciated as worthy of study by folklorists.

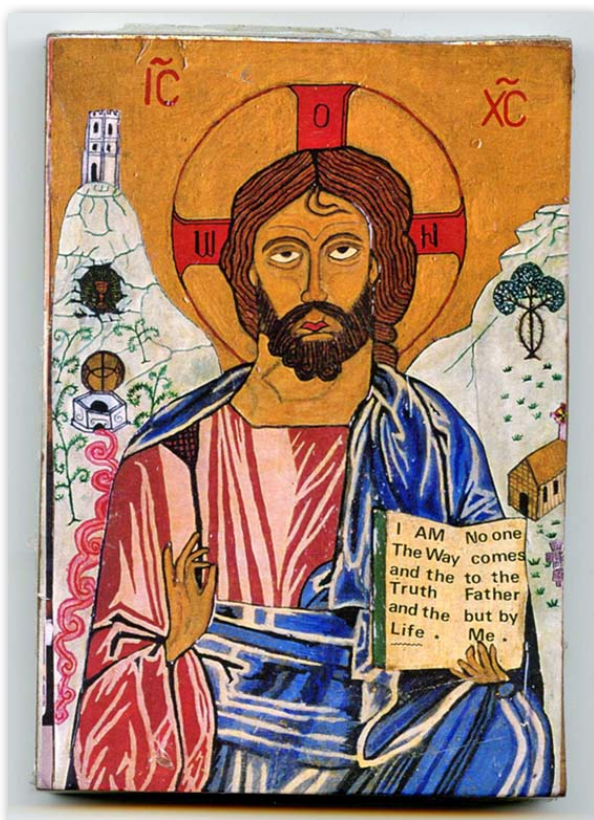
That insights from folkloristics can continue to enrich the study of religion is beyond doubt. Ülo Valk and I have argued recently for the usefulness of folklore genres in relation to the study of vernacular religion.

Belief seems to be an elusive category, difficult to grasp and define if we think about it as an entity in the world of ideas. Understanding becomes easier if we look at *expressions* of belief in behaviour, ritual, custom, art and music, in textual and other forms. These expressed beliefs can be reproduced, described, analysed and discussed. If beliefs are verbally articulated, they can be studied as forms of generic expression and discursive practices. ... Genre has not necessarily proved to be a useful category for the classification of texts, but it has considerable power to illuminate the processes, how texts are produced, perceived and understood. As genres emerge and grow historically, they mix the voice of tradition with individual voices, and instead of being univocal, they are always ambivalent, dialogic and polyphonic. (Bowman and Valk 2012: 9)

In this respect the usefulness of genre is not located in its usage as a tool for indexing, but as a tool for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena encountered in the field. Honko challenged us to keep reviewing and refining our ideas and analyses in relation to genres (e.g. Honko 1989, see Honko 2013b).

Personal experience narratives (PENs), for example, are key in the understanding and analysis of vernacular religion and contemporary spirituality,





Icon of Jesus in Glastonbury, created by Father John Ives, Celtic Orthodox Church, Glastonbury.

and similarly useful is the 'belief story', characterised by the folklorist Gillian Bennett (1989: 291), as that class of informal stories which illustrate current community beliefs; which tell not only of personal experiences but also of those that have happened to other people; and which are used to explore and validate the belief traditions of a given community by showing how experience matches expectations. Honko demonstrated that fieldwork-based study of the relationship between belief, practice and narrative produces material that is invaluable in the study of religion in traditional contexts (Honko 1964), but it is also crucial in relation to new religious movements and looser forms of contemporary spirituality, providing insights into the worldview of groups and individuals who are drawing from eclectic 'pools of tradition' in an age of globalisation and hypermediatisation. From the religious studies viewpoint I find Ninian Smart's use of the term 'myth' for 'significant story' very useful as it sidesteps issues of truth or falsehood and concentrates on what that story is doing, and whether or not it has significance for individuals and groups in particular contexts (Smart 1969, 1973).

One reason to be aware of the nuances of narrative

and belief is the impact of the 2012 London Olympics Opening ceremony, which featured a stylised but recognisable Glastonbury Tor. This has prompted renewed interest in William Blake's 'Jerusalem' and the legend that Jesus came to Glastonbury, a small town in the south west of England that has been characterised variously as the cradle of English Christianity, ancient Avalon, New Jerusalem and the heart chakra of planet earth (see Bowman 2005). The poet, artist and visionary William Blake (1757–1827) eloquently reflected the myth of Jesus in England in these words:

And did those feet in ancient times  
Walk upon England's mountains green?  
And was the Holy Lamb of God  
On England's pleasant pastures seen?

Many believe that Blake was referring specifically to the legend that Jesus visited Glastonbury (Bowman 2003–4). However, while it is one thing for there to be a myth, what is important for the study of vernacular religion is whether that myth is believed, whether it has currency, whether it is indeed a significant story for people now. While there has undoubtedly been raised awareness of the legend that Christ came to Glastonbury, this tells us nothing of belief. Simple awareness of the existence of the story is of a different order from understanding its significance for those Christians who believe that by coming to Glastonbury on pilgrimage they are walking in the footsteps of Jesus, as opposed to the Christians for whom it is clearly fanciful; for the American man who believes he is an incarnation of both Jesus and Buddha, who therefore felt he had to come to Glastonbury having been here in a previous life; for the contemporary Druids who believe that there was once a great Druidic university in Glastonbury to which people came from all over Europe and beyond, and who therefore consider it would have been perfectly natural for Jesus to seek it out. These can be properly understood only through fieldwork. As Honko indicated, we need to know what stories are significant, and for whom. We need to know whether a myth is 'live', and how is it being used to inform, construct, support, challenge or modify belief in a variety of contexts. If we truly want to engage with religion as it is lived, not only do we need to take stories seriously, we need a nuanced but broadly articulated and understood vocabulary for dealing with those distinctions. These nuanced ways of talking about stories and expressions of belief are a contribution that folkloristics can make to the study of contemporary religion.

### Tradition, tradition ecology and folklore's multiple lives

Issues with which Honko engaged at various points in his career were tradition, tradition ecology and the different 'lives' of folklore (e.g. see Honko 1991, 1999, 2013a and 2013c), fields in which folkloristics and religious studies can still usefully enrich each other for informed understandings of recent issues relating to identity, elective ethnicity and the afterlives of folklore in the contemporary spiritual milieu.

The American folklorist Henry Glassie's feisty definition of tradition as 'the creation of the future out of the past' and history as 'an artful assembly of materials from the past, designed for usefulness in the future' (Glassie 1995: 395) demonstrates the flexible and pragmatic understanding of tradition on the part of some folklorists. Honko usefully distinguished between the 'pool of tradition' and culture (the latter drawing selectively and pragmatically upon the former), and attempted to demonstrate systematically how folklore is subject to different phases and functions. I now turn to the role of tradition in the formation and consolidation of cultural and spiritual identities in the contemporary milieu, with specific reference to contemporary Celticism and Celtic spirituality. These fields illustrate so many of the issues highlighted by Honko – the importance of process; what happens to aspects of tradition removed from their original context and re-used/recycled/re-positioned in different forms and contexts; the role of individuals in making choices, activating or bypassing tradition; and the construction of complex identities by drawing on pools of tradition.

### Celticism, Celticity and Celtic spirituality

In talking about Celticism here, I am using Joep Leerssen's terminology to refer to

... not the study of the Celts and their history, but rather the study of their reputation and of the meanings and connotations ascribed to the term 'Celtic'. To the extent that 'Celtic' is an idea with a wide and variable application, Celticism becomes a complex and significant issue in the European history of ideas: the history of what people wanted that term to mean. (Leerssen 1996: 3)

In Great Britain and Ireland, ideas about the Celts and what might constitute Celticity have varied at different periods, reflected in the influential Celtic revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and

the most recent revival of the late twentieth/ early twenty-first centuries. The eighteenth-century Celtic revival had a complex political backdrop. While the Union of the Crowns occurred in 1603 when the Stuart King James VI of Scotland became also King James I of England, Wales and Ireland, England and Scotland remained separate states with separate legislative powers. Only in 1707, as a result of the acts of union passed by both the Scottish and English Parliaments, did Scotland and England unite within a single kingdom called Great Britain. Also in 1707, the Welsh scholar Edward Lhuyd published the *Archaeologia Britannica*. From researching the ancient and modern languages of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany, Lhuyd identified a 'family' of languages which he called 'Celtic'. Simon James claims that with the 1707 Union 'the name of Briton – the best, and time-honoured, potential collective label for those peoples of the island who saw themselves as other than English – was appropriated for all subjects of the new, inevitably English-dominated superstate' (James 1999: 48). Lhuyd's work was not only of scholarly interest, but it provided 'the basis for a wholly new conception of the identities and histories of the non-English peoples of the [British] isles, which at that moment were under strong political and cultural threat' (James 1999: 47). Undoubtedly, the conclusion that the Celtic languages formed an independent branch of the Indo-European linguistic family, and the idea that there was one language group gave the popular impression of a common language, which was interpreted by some as a common culture, cultural identity and 'character'. In this perception of commonality lay the roots of pan-Celticism, which assumes that all Celtic cultures/peoples were/are the same, thought/think the same, and had/have similar taste in cultural artefacts such as art and music. It also paved the way for the idea of a 'Celtic spirit'.

If, in the eighteenth century, the term Celtic initially had largely geographic and linguistic connotations, in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Celticity increasingly seemed to be regarded as an identity, even a quality, that could be acquired, while within the British Isles, Celtic has become increasingly broadly interpreted to embrace all Scots, Irish, Welsh, Manx, Northumbrians, and people from the West Country. While many still look to geography, language or ancestry to establish Celtic credentials, increasingly there are what I have referred to elsewhere as 'Cardiac Celts' – people who feel in their hearts that they are Celtic (Bowman 1996). Moreover, for a variety of reasons and in

varying ways, the Celts are being seen as providers of a particularly attractive 'brand' of spirituality, looked to for inspiration by a variety of spiritual seekers, Christian, New Age and Pagan, while even some Buddhist and Hindu-derived groups are articulating Celtic connections (Bowman 2000). Many people in Britain, Ireland, Western Europe, North America, New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere are now putting considerable effort into being restorers, reclaimers, rediscoverers, re-establishers of Celtic spirituality, or innovators within it. In relation to this rather complex historical and cultural context, I give three case studies involving material culture, 'fakelore' and folklore, which exemplify various tradition processes and forms of identity formation and expression.

### **Tartan: from Highland to Scottish to Celtic**

In 'Traditions in the construction of national identity' (1999, see Honko 2013c), Honko referred in passing to the seemingly shocking revelation in Hugh Trevor Roper's chapter 'The Invention of Tradition: the Highland Tradition of Scotland' in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) that the kilt was a nineteenth-century invention, and drew attention to Ranger's chapter concerning the wearing of the kilt by Africans in a Mombasa dance-competition carnival (Ranger 1983). Honko, understanding that things are what things do, concluded from this that 'a newly invented tradition ... may become interpreted as ancient and emblematic if it is associated with cultural identity and ... the same tradition may disseminate widely and become adapted to very different cultural environments and functions within a few decades' (2013: 325). A more folkloristic way of regarding some aspects of the 'invention' of Highland tradition is to see the 'modern' kilt in terms of tradition ecology, as a development of an existing tradition, namely the wearing of check-patterned material known as tartan, to reflect identity (probably initially connected with locality, reflected in the availability of natural dyes, and later to clans) which has been manipulated at different times for different purposes. As Ian Brown points out, 'Tartan's polysemy means that it has enormous potential for flexibility in use and meaning' (Brown 2012: 6).

Using tartan as a case study underlines the significance of material culture, which can refer to any aspect of the material world, constructed or natural, and encompasses an enormous range of experiential and cultural interaction with the physical world. As David Morgan puts it,

If culture is the full range of thoughts, feelings, objects, words, and practices that human beings use to construct and maintain the life-worlds in which they exist, material culture is any aspect of that world-making activity that happens in material form. That means things, but it also includes the feelings, values, fears, and obsessions that inform one's understanding and use of things. (Morgan, D. 2008: 228)

This statement is redolent of Honko's claim in 'Studies on tradition and cultural identity' (1986, see Honko 2013d) that 'Culture is not in things but in people's way of seeing, using and thinking about things' (2013: 307 [1986]). Returning to tartan, Murray G. H. Pittock comments that in Scotland,

the use of tartan to signify national antiquity and authenticity can be dated back at least to the marriage of James IV to Anne of Denmark in 1596, and by the end of the succeeding century tartan had become conflated with the symbols of Jacobite nationalist patriotism. (Pittock 1999: 86)

Tartan was associated traditionally with the Gaelic speakers of the Highlands and Western Isles (as opposed to Lowland, Scots speakers) within Scotland. After the suppression of the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745, when much of the support had come from Highland clans, the 1747 Disclotting Act or Disarming Act forbade the wearing of Highland attire. This was repealed in 1782 when tartan was 'rehabilitated' for use by loyal Scottish regiments, marking its move away from Highland to more generically Scottish identity. With the tartan-bedecked pageant stage-managed in 1822 by novelist Sir Walter Scott in Edinburgh for the visit of King George IV (who wore a kilt for the occasion), tartan was firmly established as a respectable and desirable symbol of Scottish identity. Tartan became increasingly fashionable wear (a trend boosted by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert when staying at Balmoral Castle in Scotland) with huge commercial potential and immense variety, as more and more tartan patterns were collected and created. There was development over time both in the construction of the kilt itself, from a length of checked material wrapped around the person to a more practical tailored garment, and in the identity (local, regional, national, personal, even spiritual) signified or taken on by wearing tartan.



The contemporary custom of grooms wearing kilts at weddings, and the growth in kilt wearing generally, is an important expression of 'Scottishness' both in Scotland and Scottish diaspora areas such as America, Canada and Australia. The increasing numbers of Scots of Asian and other ancestry who have taken to wearing the kilt underlines tartan's continuing role as a measure and marker of Scottish identity. Tartan can now be seen in combination with the shalwar kameez, for example, and since 1999 there has been a Singh tartan, commissioned by Lord Iqbal Singh, to be used by any Asians with Scottish connections. Additionally, tartan now has more broadly Celtic cultural resonances which in some contexts are increasing rather than diminishing in scope. The creation of a Cornish tartan, for example, was an important assertion of both Cornish and Celtic identity (Hale 2000), and Irish tartan seems to be growing in popularity. In 1998, April 6 was declared National Tartan Day in the USA, the date being linked to the Declaration of Arbroath (1320), which contains the stirring lines 'For it is not glory, it is not riches, neither is it honour, but it is liberty alone that we fight and contend for, which no honest man will lose but with his life' (Pittock 1999: 87). Liberty, Celticity and tartan are thus conflated and celebrated.

Philip Payton has written about the new pan-Celticism of Australia, where Australians of Irish, Welsh, Cornish and Scottish descent are articulating a common Celticity within a context of increasing multiculturalism, using the recently created Australian tartan as an expression of this:

The recently-created Australian tartan is a move ... to achieve a Celtic unison. Based on the colours of Central Australia and a variation on the sett of Lachlan Macquarie [Governor of New South Wales, 1810–21], this 'tartan for a Sunburnt Country' is intended to cater for those proud of being both Celtic and Australian. It is intended for all Celts. (Quoted in Payton 2000: 122)

A European Union Tartan was developed in the late 1990s. For some involved in Celtic spirituality, tartan is also an important expression of identity. At a pagan handfasting ceremony described as a 'traditional Celtic wedding' to which I was invited, for example, the English groom wore a kilt and the American bride of Irish ancestry wore a white dress with a tartan sash. One of the guests, eschewing the 'modern' tailored kilt, was proudly wearing a length of tartan material, 'traditionally' wrapped and secured as he felt it was more 'authentically Celtic'.

Tartan, according to Pittock, is 'the most widespread, most recognizable, and most central of Celtic artefacts' (Pittock 1999: 88). It can be merely a fashion choice, available to a global market, but it has a history of being a flexible, multivalent symbol of Celticity, pressed into service for a variety of causes. In this we see the way in which a material cultural artefact has had different 'lives' and uses as an identity marker, underlining Honko's assertion that 'the same tradition may disseminate widely and become adapted to very different cultural environments and functions within a few decades' (Honko 1999, see Honko 2013c: 325).

### From fakelore to tradition

One striking feature of the eighteenth-century Celtic revival was the huge growth of interest in Druids. In

Marion Bowman



Druid ceremony at Avebury.





Ancient stones at Avebury.

classical sources, Druids are described as the priestly caste of the Celts, and associated with mistletoe, oak, golden sickles, sacred groves and esoteric learning. Bards (concerned with poetry, genealogy and music), and Ovates (concerned with healing) were also part of this hierarchy. Though traditionally seen as the pagan enemies of Christianity, the image of Druids underwent considerable rehabilitation in the eighteenth century. William Stukeley, for example, became fascinated by ancient monuments in the south west of England and was influential in forging the popular link between Druids and Stonehenge and Avebury, as well as using the term 'Celts' as an alternative to 'Britons'. Stukeley envisaged the Druids coming to England, 'during the life of Abraham, or very soon after', with a religion 'so extremely like Christianity, that in effect it differ'd from it only in this; they believed in a Messiah who was to come, as we believe in him that is come' (Piggott 1989: 145).

In the 1780s and 1790s, the Welsh patriot, freemason and Unitarian Edward Williams – also known as Iolo Morganwg – presented and promoted what he claimed was an authentic, ancient Druidic tradition of the British Isles which had survived in Wales through the Bardic system, a distinctive Welsh language poetic tradition. The first Welsh Gorsedd (assembly of bards or poets) was held in 1791 on Primrose Hill in London. Morganwg claimed that ceremonies were to be held outside, 'in the eye of the sun', and were to start by honouring the four directions; he also taught what he called the Gorsedd Prayer, which he attributed to the primeval bard Talhairn:

Grant, O God! thy refuge,  
And in refuge, strength,  
And in strength, understanding,  
In understanding, knowledge,  
In knowledge, knowledge of right,  
In knowledge of right, to love it;  
In loving it, the love of all essences,  
In love of all essences, love of God,  
God and all Goodness  
(Quoted in Morgan, P. 1975: 51)

Iolo Morganwg's major concern had been the preservation and promotion of the Welsh linguistic, literary and cultural tradition. In 1819, the Gorsedd became affiliated to the Welsh Eisteddfod (itself an eighteenth-century revival of a medieval literary and musical competition), which promotes Welsh language and culture, and is still held annually in Wales. Morganwg's claims and writings were accepted as genuine at the time, and it was not until the late nineteenth century that they were revealed as forgeries. By that time, however, their influence had been established and continues to this day. When a Cornish Gorsedd was established in 1928, its purpose was to assert Cornwall's Celtic credentials and promote the revival and preservation of the Cornish language and cultural tradition. Both Wales and Cornwall have had a strong history of Methodism, and although Morganwg's Druidic prayer is recited at the Welsh 'Gorsedd of Bards of the Isle of Britain' and the Cornish Gorsedd, this is primarily a cultural rather than a religious expression. A flyer distributed

by the Cornish Gorsedd before the 1999 ceremony stated categorically 'The Gorsedd is non-political, non-religious and non-profit making and contrary to some belief, has no connection with Druidism nor any pagan practices' (Hale 2000). Former Cornish Grand Bard George Ansell is quoted as saying:

The gorsedd provides a focus for Cornish nationality and allegiance. We also meet throughout the year and pronounce on important matters to do with Cornwall and Cornishness, such as the closure of hospitals and threats to our main-line railway. If you don't have a community, you don't have a culture. (*The Times*, 'Weekend', 24 July 1999)

However, contemporary Druids consider that they too are part of a community, with Celtic cultural connections. Many Druids feel that they reconnect both with the Celtic past and with nature through keeping what is now widely known as the 'eightfold' or Celtic calendar. The historian Ronald Hutton contends that the 'notion of a distinctive 'Celtic' ritual year ... is a scholastic construction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which should now be considerably revised or even abandoned altogether (Hutton 1996: 411). Whether or not there *was* an eightfold Celtic calendar, it is now firmly part of the spiritual life of those who regard themselves as practitioners of contemporary Celtic spirituality. Druid ceremonies are held at numerous sites, including Stonehenge, Avebury and other stone circles, and tend to be performed 'in the eye of the sun' (*i.e.* usually in the middle of the day). The spirits of the four directions are honoured at the start of the ritual, and Morganwg's Gorsedd Prayer is said (sometimes adapted to include 'God and Goddess', or 'Gods'). In the contexts of both contemporary Druidry, and Welsh and Cornish language and culture, then, Morganwg's words and practices have become traditional, regardless of issues of authenticity. They are what they do in both cultural and religious contexts.

### **Carmina Gadelica: folklore and its afterlives**

I have looked at tartan's flexible history and varied lives in relation to identity and its manipulation for political, cultural, commercial and personal purposes, and the evolution of Morganwg's 'fakelore' into tradition. My final case study relates to Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* (songs/poetry/incantations of the Gaels), a linguistic, literary and

cultural artefact intricately bound up with both the history of folklore scholarship and tradition ecology.

At the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century the development of the field of folklore and the notion of 'survivals' posited by Edward Tylor in his book, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom* (1871) had a profound effect on ideas relating to the Celts, their history, language and spiritual qualities. Survivals, according to Tylor,

are processes, customs, opinions, and so forth, which have been carried on by force of habit into a new state of society different from that in which they had their original home, and thus they remain as proofs and examples of an old condition of culture out of which the newer has been evolved. (Quoted in Sharpe 1986: 54)

Very much in this vein, influential English folklorists Alice and Laurence Gomme, writing on British folklore, remarked that

In every society there are people who do not progress either in religion or in polity with the foremost of the nation. They are left stranded amidst the progress. They live in out-of-the-way villages, or in places where general culture does not penetrate easily; they keep to old ways, practices, and ideas, following with religious awe all their parents had held to be necessary to their lives. These people are living depositories of ancient history – a history that has not been written down, but which has come down by tradition. Knowing the conditions of survivals in culture, the folklorist uses them in the ancient meaning, not in their modern setting, tries to find out their significance and importance in relation to their origin, and thus lays the foundation for the science of folklore. (Gomme and Gomme 1916: 10)

Folklore collectors went looking for 'survivals' on the margins of industrialised Britain, which further 'associated rurality with age; and conflated age and rurality with spirituality' (Bennett 1993: 87).

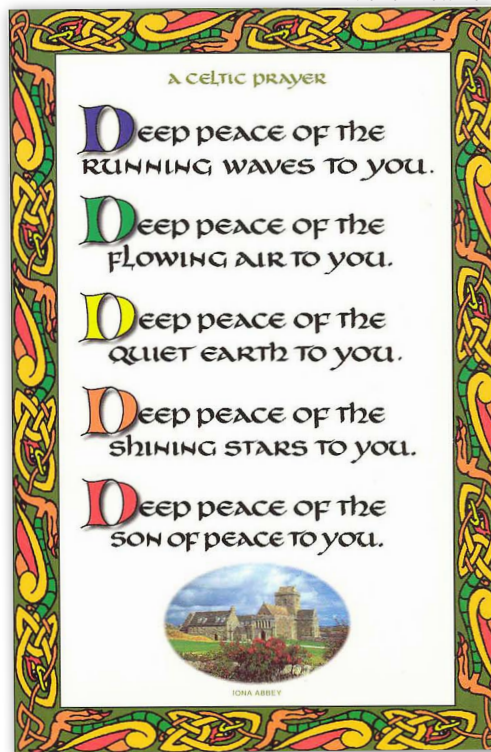
In this context, Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* became one of the most significant Celtic literary artefacts of this period. Collected in Gaelic in the Scottish Hebrides in the late nineteenth century, the *Carmina Gadelica* includes a huge variety of prayers and invocations, blessings for everyday

tasks (e.g. milking, weaving, grinding), addresses to saints, charms (e.g. for toothache, the evil eye, indigestion), journey prayers and songs. Carmichael had a number of motivations in collecting the *Carmina*. It was a time when folklore collecting was being actively pursued both to discover survivals and for fear that folklore would be lost, and also when a certain amount of polishing, reworking or 'restoring' of collected texts was common. There was a political aspect, for Carmichael hoped 'that by making the book up in as good a form as I could in matter and material, it might perhaps be the means of conciliating some future politician in favour of our dear Highland people' (quoted in Meek 2000: 61). The Breton scholar Ernest Renan (1823–92) had characterised the Celts as 'spiritual beings and visionary dreamers' (Meek 2000: 46), with an enlightened approach to the integration of paganism and Christianity, and Carmichael too believed in the special spirituality of the Highland Celt and the antiquity of the material he collected:

It is the product of faraway thinking, come down on the long stream of time. ... Some of the hymns may have been composed within the cloistered cells of Derry and Iona, and some of the incantations among the cromlechs of Stonehenge and the standing-stones of Callarnis [Callanish]. (Alexander Carmichael, Introduction to *Carmina Gadelica*, vol. 1, quoted in Meek 2000: 63–4)

As Angela Piccini comments, 'Past and present in the western and northern reaches of Britain eventually came to be transformed into a Celtic always' (Piccini 1999: 20).

*Carmina Gadelica* was first published in six volumes from 1900; Carmichael produced translations for the first two volumes, and over a period of years translations for the remaining volumes were completed. Whereas earlier editions had Gaelic texts



One of many versions of the nineteenth century 'Deep peace' presented as a 'Celtic Prayer'; this example sold at Iona.

alongside English translations by Carmichael and others, in the most recent edition (published by Floris Books in 1992 with subsequent reprintings) *Carmina Gadelica* appears only in English.

*Carmina Gadelica* continues to be popular, but in an afterlife removed from its original linguistic, cultural and folkloristic context. This is part of a broader trend, for 'Celtic' literature for popular consumption tends to come in a homogenised package, with Irish, Welsh, Cornish and Gaelic writings (which we rarely see in their varied original versions) seeming all the same, with translations of early medieval, nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts appearing together without differentiation, often with the implication that these are

all 'ancient' writings. From Celtic literature appearing in English for an English-speaking audience has emerged a sort of hybrid 'Celtish', reflecting the style of English translations of Celtic literature, involving formulaic and frequently threefold repetition, metrical forms, short lines and archaic turns of phrase (e.g. 'Power of storm be thine, Power of moon be thine, Power of the sun'). Something that is frequently presented as an 'ancient Celtic blessing' ('Deep peace of the running wave to you, Deep peace of the flowing air to you, Deep peace of the quiet earth to you'), was actually written in the late nineteenth century by William Sharp (who wrote under the pen-name Fiona Macleod), an influential figure in the Celtic revival. 'Celtic' writings thus seem timeless, for they are often presented in an a-temporal manner. Because of the pervading 'Celtish' style, Celtic prayers, blessings and ritual/liturgical speech being written now, whether Christian, Druid, New Age or pagan, frequently sound similar; this in turn all feeds back into the impression of pan-Celticism and the pervasiveness of the Celtic spirit. The *Carmina Gadelica* can now be found in the context of the literature and ritual of contemporary Celtic spirituality. Reviewing the 1992 Floris Books paperback edition of the *Carmina Gadelica*, for example,



Philip Shallcrass of the British Druid Order (BDO) wrote:

The Druidic interest in this collection of folklore lies in its obvious antiquity, as well as its lyrical beauty. As raw material for ritual it is invaluable. ... Many of these are heavily Christianised, but many more are not, and sing out clearly of our pagan past. (Shallcrass 1993: 37)

These three case studies, although partially historical, are directly relevant to my fieldwork in contemporary Celtic spirituality and (re)negotiations of Celtic identities in the twenty-first century. David McCrone, Angela Morris and Richard Kiely (1995), very much in Honko's mould, point out that

A considerable body of literature has grown up to debunk heritage, to show that much of it is a modern fabrication with dubious commercial and political rationales. Being able to show that heritage is not 'authentic', that it is not 'real', however, is not the point. If we take the Scottish example of tartanry, the interesting issue is not why much of it is a 'forgery', but why it continues to have such cultural power. That is the point which critics like Hugh Trevor-Roper (1983) miss. (Quoted in Brown 2012: 9–10)

People who perceive themselves as Scottish, or, more broadly, Celtic (not necessarily the same constituents) utilise tartan as a significant symbol and expression of identity. Contemporary Druids feel connected with Celtic spirituality and a Celtic past through the celebration of seasonal ritual at Avebury, including the recitation of Iolo Morganwg's Gorsedd prayer and possibly a blessing taken from *Carmina Gadelica*. They are not simply enacting 'inauthentic' eighteenth-century visions of a Celtic past; they are participating in and developing a vibrant form of modern religiosity, drawing on a range of historical, cultural and folkloric resources. As Stuart Hall contends, 'Everywhere, cultural identities are emerging which are not fixed, but poised, in *transition*, between different positions; which draw on different cultural traditions at the same time; and which are the product of those complicated cross-overs and cultural mixes which are increasingly common in a globalized world' (Hall 1992: 310).

Kamppinen and Hakamies, looking to future research utilising Honko's theory of culture, confirm that 'pools of tradition are partly used without earlier

boundaries of cultural identity, nationality, ethnicity or sacred and profane' (Kamppinen and Hakamies 2013: 101). Honko, by engaging frequently with issues of tradition ecology and folklore's multiple lives, encourages us to see contemporary phenomena in historical perspective, to appreciate the processes that operate in the creation, transmission, collection and transmutation of folklore in culture, and folklore's complex role in identity formation and expression.

## Conclusion

I have argued here for a renewed stress on, and exploration of, the value to cultural research that a close alliance between religious studies and folkloristics can bring. In this respect, I suggest that vernacular religion builds on expertise and insights from both fields, which in many ways complements issues raised and factors highlighted by Lauri Honko. As Primiano puts it, 'The study of vernacular religion, like the study of folklore, appreciates religion as an historic, as well as contemporary, process and marks religion in everyday life as a construction of mental, verbal, and material expressions (Primiano 2012: 384). Understanding the importance and interaction of both natural and cultural contexts; the need for careful, nuanced observation of process and practice; and the significance of individual creativity and instrumentality in relation to tradition are all arguably trajectories of Honko's research that remain crucial if we do indeed want to comprehend culture, and do justice to 'religion as it is lived, as humans encounter, understand, interpret and practice it' (Primiano 1995: 44).

Reviewing some of Honko's work has underlined for me the importance he placed on scholars, individually and collectively, regularly reviewing their models, their assumptions and their scholarly tools and generating discussion of such matters. Honko's legacy, our challenge, is to deal with genre development, the functions and ecology of tradition, and tradition processes in the contemporary milieu in contexts of both continuity and change. There is continuity as well as change in some forms of contemporary spirituality and emergent identities, for example, as I have illustrated above. However, there is change as well as continuity in the scholarly tools, attitudes and expectations we bring to the study of such phenomena. Folklorists no longer regard their primary work as salvaging survivals or plotting prototypes. Modern Druids incorporating into their ritual a blessing from *Carmina Gadelica* may well, in their



assumptions of the words' antiquity and authorship, have more in common with Alexander Carmichael than subsequent folklorists. As Ülo Valk and I have commented,

Although belief in analytical categories as basic tools for producing firm knowledge has weakened, other concepts and approaches have emerged that offer alternative perspectives to those methodologies which constructed exhaustive systems of classification, transcultural taxonomies and universal definitions. Many scholars nowadays think that the goal of scholarship is not to produce authoritarian theoretical statements but rather to observe and capture the flow of vernacular discourse and reflect on it. As everyday culture cannot be neatly compartmentalized into the theoretical containers of academic discourse, it often seems more rewarding to follow the methodological credo of Lauri Honko and produce textual ethnographies (Honko 1998: 1). Rooted in whatever constitutes reality for a particular group or person, such studies allow us to see how theory is put into practice, how beliefs impact on different aspects of life, the ways in which worldview must affect, and be expressed in, everyday life. (Bowman and Valk 2012: 2)

In a context where globalisation, hypermediatisation, super-diversity, neoliberal economics, and multiple cognitive maps of reality are all bubbling up and rippling the surface of pools of tradition, there are still many lessons to be learned from Lauri Honko. ■

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